

Cold Hard Ground

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Category: How to Train Your Dragon, Rise of the Guardians

Genre: Fantasy, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Astrid, Jack Frost

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-03-06 18:45:21

Updated: 2013-05-03 13:54:18

Packaged: 2016-04-26 14:38:40

Rating: K+

Chapters: 3

Words: 2,551

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: When Astrid was a girl, she most enjoyed the story-telling aspects of festivals. She was used to hearing the stories of the mysterious spirit of winter. In fact, she harbored a belief in this odd spirit. But he's real! Teenaged Astrid can hardly believe it. But apparently, she's the only one in the village who can see him. So she must believe just enough . . . [Jastrid oneshots]

1. Avalanche Aftermath

Astrid had barely been able to concentrate in the cave.

Yes, her heart began to bounce around in her chest when she found herself tightly locked in Hiccup's embrace. She'd studied Hiccup's eyes, amazed that she had never noticed their color. Green - a rather attractive green.

But the avalanche dominated her mind. Mostly because she knew who had caused it.

Astrid stumbled over another lump in the snow. Her knees hit the ground and she shuddered at the sudden, harsh cold seeping through her leggings. She stared down at the snow for a moment, trying to understand why she had come up here. Astrid had tried to forget what she had seen on the peak of Crane Mountain. Honestly, in all the drama that had arisen recently, she'd done a fine job of pushing the memories into a dusty corner of her mind. But all the snow had flooded her brain, tugging the memories back like a child retrieves a beloved sled after a snow storm.

When she raised her head, she found herself face to face with â€|him.

He was surprisingly similar to her in looks - pale hair, bright blue eyes, thin but fit torso. The only difference that she noticed time and time again was the mischevious grin lighting up his face. None of

the other vikings seemed as clever as he did, and Hiccup, though just as clever, wasn't as troublesome.

The boy hovering in front of her sported his familiar grin. He reached down and, in a move that made Astrid's stomach spin, gently yanked a lock of hair that always fell in front of her eyes. "Hello there, Astrid," Jack Frost whispered.

His voice wasn't like Hiccup's. Hiccup's had a sharp but welcome bite to it - a reasonable, steady edge. Jack's was soft, like slowly drifting snow, but it aged him considerably. Astrid blinked rapidly, trying to clear her head of the details pouring in. She swept her bangs behind her ear, but they were as stubborn as her, and fell back into place. Astrid's jaw clenched as Jack chuckled lightly.

Astrid straightened up, and she folded her arms across her chest as she glared at Jack. Jack groaned mockingly, swinging his staff around and shooting streams of ice through the air. Trying not to gaze at his icy creations, Astrid stuck out her bottom lip the slightest bit and tried to look tough.

"Okay, what did I do now?" Jack said, a smile tugging at his lips as he humored her.

"You know."

Jack stared at her, and Astrid tried to read his expression as he mumbled, "Do I?"

Huffing, she spelled it out for him. "The avalanche today."

He rolled his eyes and laid his staff across his thin shoulders. "Oh, that." Shaking his head at her, he smirked and said, "Didn't hurt anybody. What's the problem?"

Astrid realized with a cold shock that he had no idea. "Hiccup and I were on the mountain."

Jack's playful demeanor vanished. He scruntized her, not bothering to conceal his concern. "You okay?"

Astrid nodded. Her anger diminished. He hadn't meant it then.

Realizing how much emotion he was showing to her, Jack cracked his neck and smiled coolly. "How did the runt do?"

The anger burned and Astrid scowled. She snorted, "He's fine too."

Jack stared down at the village, dwarfed as it sat at the foot of the mountain. "Too bad."

As she sucked in her lip, biting it so she wouldn't lash out at him, Astrid turned her strong glare onto him. "What is your problem?" she asked, stepping forward.

The boy spun to face her. Taking a step toward her, he stared at Astrid. Their noses were five inches apart. "No problem," he said. His eyes clearly said otherwise, but Astrid couldn't tell. She cursed

herself in her head. Hiccup knew emotions like she knew every curve and every chip of her ax. He had tried to educate her on how to read people like open books, but she hadn't paid attention at all.

Astrid couldn't find anything else to say. The two of them backed away from each other, busying their hands with trivial things and looking anywhere but at each other. The silence hovered over their heads for about a minute before Astrid blurted out, "I have to go. Stormfly's probably looking for me."

Jack made eye contact. "And that Haddock guy too," he reminded her, though resentfully.

Astrid summoned her last ounce of bitterness and she huffed at Jack. "Just be more careful next time," she said lamely. A smile formed on Jack's pale face again, and Astrid spun around before the taunting could begin anew.

She took two steps forward; then she heard Jack call, "Oh, Astrid?"

"Yeah?"

There was no answer, so Astrid turned around. She saw she'd been had when Jack leaped forward, gravity abandoning its hold on him. Her eyes widened as his lips met hers. Their foreheads grazed, and Astrid's eyes slid closed involuntarily. She felt her stomach twirl, over and over again. She struggled internally to pull back. After a few seconds of simultaneous euphoria and torture, she was able to step back.

Jack seemed dizzy. He dropped to the ground, swaying a bit. With a strangely goofy smile, he said, "See you later, Astrid."

Astrid spun around, racing down the hill, trying to fill her mind with thoughts of Hiccup. His eyes, his metal leg, his sharp voice, his intellect, everything. Eventually, the kiss was pushed back into that same dusty corner.

Not forgotten, but still, to her slight relief, still there.

2. Snow Tears

Astrid stumbled up the hill, shaking in the cool air. She felt the tears freezing on her cheeks, and she knew he was here. For once, she didn't really mind. For a brief moment, she glanced up. She could see Jack's figure through the snow. Astrid looked down at her arms, folded tightly across her chest. Her teeth clacked furiously, and she bit her lip in an attempt to stop the chattering. When she tasted something wet and coppery in her mouth, she knew she hadn't succeeded.

"J-J-Jack," she gasped, shivering. The girl could barely feel the tears on her cheeks anymore.

"Well, lookie here," she heard his soft, mocking voice croon. "If it isn't Astrid Hofferson. What happened to the boyfriend?"

The thought of the boyfriend squeezed a few more tears out of her

eyes. She didn't look up. Instead, her knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground, shivering harder as the wet snow soaked her skin.

"Astrid?" Jack still sounded like he had a smirk on his face, but a smaller smirk, at least.

She opened her mouth to speak - shut up or he's not my boyfriend came to mind - but all that came out, to her horror, was a squeaky sob. It was so un-Viking that she was repulsed by herself.

Jack sounded worried as he asked again, "Astrid?" The snow suddenly died down drastically. Astrid felt the sun on her back. He must have parted the clouds just to see her better. Or warm her up, but she didn't want to think he was being that nice.

"Heather." That was about all she could say, Astrid found, as she shook away the cold and the pain of seeing Heather's lips on Hiccup's cheek. And he hadn't pushed her away! He hadn't protested! He had just flushed and stuttered and frozen and smiled - smiled!

"Oh." Jack sighed, and Astrid peered through her bangs. Jack had plopped down in front of her, his legs crossed as his legs swung from the shepherd's staff he carried everywhere. Jack blinked slowly. "I noticed her."

"Did you see them â€|" Astrid found it hard to speak, but she forced the rest out anyway. "Did you see them kiss?"

Jack drew in a sharp breath, and his eyebrows lowered almost menacingly. "That jerk," he muttered. Astrid watched him fume, before her confusion and curiosity took over.

"Why?"

He looked up at her, her own confusion mirrored on his face. "Why what?"

Astrid laughed bitterly. "Why are you so mad about it? Less competition for you, anyway, right?"

Instead of denying having any interest in her, like he usually did and she always expected, he just scowled and looked at the ground. "He just- nothing."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You have to tell me."

"Nothing!"

Astrid's eyes watered again and she stared down at the snow-capped tips of her boots. She heard Jack puff out icy air.

"He doesn't even know how to value who he's got."

She glanced up at him, more confused than ever. "I â€| huh?"

Jack grunted in frustration and stabbed the ground with his staff. He mumbled, "He's so lucky. He's got you. And he can't even treat you right." Refusing to meet her eyes, he twirled his eyes in their sockets and looked around in a falsely careless manner.

Astrid didn't know how to respond to that. Was that a compliment? A compliment to her? An insult to Hiccup? What was Jack talking about? She thought of the moment she had witnessed, and another tear fell down. A second one followed it, and she watched the dark grey imprints in the snow below her.

Suddenly, something cool - not a bad, freezing cold, just a cool sensation - draped across her back. She jerked her head up, and something hard and pointed banged against the top of her head. Yelping, she ducked. Tilting her head back, slowly, Astrid came face to face - literally - with Jack. He had, she realized with a flush in her cheeks, draped a comforting arm across her back. She lowered her head and leaned into him. It felt nice, having someone to lean on.

"He couldn't have meant it," Jack murmured in her ear. "Maybe it was an accident. Maybe she started it." He whispered those things over and over. Astrid heard without listening at first. Then, in a matter of speaking, her mind began to thaw. Heather had only been kissing Hiccup on the cheek. Nothing huge, right? He hadn't kissed her back. Maybe he was in shock. Maybe he was confused. Hiccup didn't seem to know what to do on the few occasions that Astrid had kissed him, after all.

Her tears were dry when she sniffled one last time and arched her back. Jack, in an almost reluctant fashion, slid his arm off her back and scooted away. She looked at him, wondering what to say. Maybe, Astrid thought, she should thank him. Instead, her elbow reached out of its own accord, jabbing Jack in the stomach.

He wheezed and clutched at his stomach. "Geez, thanks!" he grumbled.

Astrid smiled weakly. "Thanks, Jack," she mumbled. Quickly, she sprung to her feet, twirled around, and set off down the mountain again. The cold had lessened and the snowfall subsided. The mountain was almost pleasant now - as pleasant as Berk could be, anyway.

She heard Jack sigh behind her. "See you around â€| Astrid."

3. Kids, Huh?

Astrid's bangs fluttered above her forehead as she huffed in frustration. "Gustav," she began. What else could she say? The little boy had been following her around all day, trying to convince her to go on a date with Snotlout. Obviously Snotlout's doing.

"Ye-e-es?" The boy said slyly, pushing his helmet out of his eyes. He looked up at Astrid, half-mischievously, half-hopefully. Astrid had no idea what to tell him. Part of her wanted to throw an ax just above his head - to give him an idea of her feelings. But her other half couldn't bear to disappoint the little guy.

"I . . ." she struggled. Maybe some time alone would clear her

thoughts. How could she get away from this little pes- er, boy? Gustav tapped his foot impatiently on the frozen solid ground.

Astrid pulled an innocent expression onto her face. "I'll need to think about it. Alone."

Gustav opened his mouth to protest, but Astrid added, "It's either that or I say no right now." She punctuated this with an I-mean-business-and-so-does-my-ax look that she had perfected over the years.

The skinny figure's shoulders drooped. "Okay, Astrid," he mumbled. Turning on his heels, he trudged back toward home.

Astrid tried to ignore the unsettling twist of her stomach.

"Kids, huh?"

She never thought she would hear that voice in the midst of the village. "Jack!" she gasped, lowering her voice as she twirled around. She came face to face with Jack. As usual. She tried to ignore the small, glittering snowflakes adorning his long, dark, fluffy lashes framing his amazing blue ey-

Ignore them, Astrid. Sweet baby Thor in a thunderstorm, ignore them!

"You saw that entire thing?" she said, avoiding his gaze as she glanced at Gustav's retreating figure.

"Snotlout's that thug with the self-igniting dragon, right?" Obviously he had. Astrid graced that question with a nod. Jack landed on the ground. He stabbed his staff into it and began spinning around it in lazy circles. "He won't be getting far with that kind of attitude," Jack chuckled. "Does he know anything about getting a woman?"

Astrid's face lit up with a grin as she retorted, "Oh, sure, like you're the expert on that one."

The frost boy stopped spinning. His gaze darted to the ground, and his shoulders slumped the tiniest fraction of an inch. Astrid felt another twist of the stomach. She must have touched on a sensitive subject.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out.

She was sorry. Astrid Hofferson was sorry. Yes, she had felt regret for her actions before, but admitting that regret? Out loud? Inconceivable. Her jaw dropped a little.

Jack's eyes met hers. She couldn't look away. He studied her surprised face, then smiled. "It's fine," he assured her. He shifted, a wider smile blooming on his face. He looked at Gustav's tracks that marred the frost boy's white creation. "They're quite a handful, huh?"

Astrid blinked. "Who?"

Jack dipped his head in the direction the young boy had trudged away in. "Kids."

Astrid sighed and huffed at her troublesome bangs. "I just- I'm not good with them. Not like Hiccup or Snotlout are."

Jack shrugged. "You never know. At least they acknowledge your existence."

She thought about questioning that curious statement, but when Jack's pale lips tightened

Fingers clenching his staff, he swung forward, his face almost uncomfortably close to hers.

Jack slowly bent down, his lips heading for her cheek. Astrid knew this was a question. A "May I" of sorts. She could have moved away. She could have stepped back, or glared at him. She could have turned aside. She could have swung a fist his way.

Instead, she sighed as a cold, tingling sensation accosted her right cheek. Despite the already frigid weather, it felt good. Very good.

He pulled back, and they locked eyes once again. Astrid felt her heart ramming against her chest. Jack's cheeks flushed blue. Astrid was sure her own were a healthy shade of scarlet by now.

As she spun, she tried to justify her actions. As she began racing away, she told herself she was just feeling remorse for hurting him. As she ducked behind a house, her fingers unconsciously reached up to her cheek and brushed Jack's kiss.

End
file.